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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 000173

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SUBJECT: KHOST PROVINCE: STABLE SECURITY SITUATION AND GOOD
GOVERNANCE PERMIT SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY

REF: 07 Kabul 3913

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Khost's security situation has improved over the last six months. Afghan National Security Forces and Coalition Forces have performed joint operations in less secure areas, and police morale is improving. The generally stable security situation has allowed significant reconstruction and development work in the province. Khost has an extremely effective governor in Arsala Jamal.

Security

¶2. (SBU) Khost has a largely positive security environment despite its border location and immediate proximity to North Waziristan, Pakistan. Only two of Khost's 13 districts (Sabari and Gorbiz) are classified as somewhat insecure, but Coalition Forces (CF) and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are able to operate even in those two districts. Recent sectarian fighting between Sunni and Shia groups in Pakistan's Kurram Agency has led to an influx of refugees (about 600 families) into Khost. UNHCR and the provincial government have been able to provide assistance to the refugees.

¶3. (SBU) Strong coordination between CF and ANSF has helped sustain the stable security environment in Khost. U.S. military units remain positioned alongside ANSF at seven of the 13 district centers. A recent joint ANSF and CF-initiated operation ("Mattoon") in Sabari District and Zambar region was designed to lessen extremist influence in the area. It has seen strong initial success with a surprising number of elders welcoming the operation; this success is tempered by some resident complaints concerning repeated searches of compounds and about missing household items.

¶4. (SBU) Governor Jamal has regularly requested closer involvement of provincial leaders prior to detention operations, to the extent possible. Asking officials (governor and sub-governors primarily) to bring in targeted residents for questioning - or eventual handover - represents a sensitive area still in need of improvement. CF are aware of this priority.

¶5. (SBU) Recent pay parity salary increases have helped improve morale among Khost police. The force has had some difficulty staffing security positions in one border district (Spera). Officers argue that those who volunteer for duty in the most volatile areas should receive "danger pay." Khost residents

continue to complain of police corruption.

Development

¶6. (U) The PRT's "outside-in" project strategy, which emphasizes development in remote areas of the province, makes use of Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) funding, with an estimated USD 43M in CERP funds expended in Khost in the last six months. All districts with the exception of a few isolated areas continue to see significant levels of reconstruction. Recent military operations in Zanbar, Sabari District -- one of the areas with little development activity -- will allow projects to begin.

¶7. (U) Work on the Khost-Gardez road - the major transit route between Khost and Kabul - is set to begin this spring, implemented by USAID partner Louis Berger Group. Improved winter maintenance - also a USAID initiative - should help prevent road closures. Khost leaders and residents continue to press the PRT for an airport plan. Only U.S. forces use both of the province's current runways. Khost provides a large manual labor pool to Gulf States, and air travel access to Kabul would help expand work opportunities and promote greater investment.

Governance

¶8. (SBU) The reach and visibility of Khost provincial officials has improved across the province. Individual leader effectiveness, however, remains mixed. The gap between Khost residents and provincial government has closed, but there remain criticisms of corruption. Relations between Khost and Kabul have improved recently. Notably, a delegation of Khost officials (Governor Jamal, Provincial Council members, and Members of Parliament) met with IROA ministers in November to press province-wide priorities (reftel).

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Their unified voice led to positive follow-up by some ministers (the Minister of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD), for example) but not others (Agriculture).

¶9. (U) Governor Jamal remains a strong leader, ably managing relations with the PRT, the tribes, Kabul, and the media. He survived suicide car bomb attacks in August and October. Governor Jamal enjoys good relations with key constituencies such as tribes, religious leaders and civil society.

¶10. (U) The Provincial Council (PC) is a functioning body dominated by a few key members. The chairman usually represents it at project-opening ceremonies. Female members have been largely absent from events. The PC has sought a larger role in project prioritization; a new reconstruction committee (echoing an already established and effective security committee) will give PC members a more formal role.

¶11. (SBU) Khost's district administrators are based at district centers throughout the province. In key areas, they have helped improve relations with residents and have increasingly been brought into discussions about project priorities. Weak district administrators have been reassigned. Some friction remains between officials who were associated with the former Communist government and those who led opposing mujahadeen forces.

¶12. (U) Some line ministries function well in Khost, particularly MRRD. The Provincial Development Council meets regularly to prioritize projects. USAID has funded a program to help improve capabilities. Line ministry directors regularly compliment the active and well-funded PRT project strategy, while remaining critical of IROA follow-up regarding provincial priorities.

WOOD